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A DOWN TO EARTH SUPPLEMENT FOR THE YOUNG AND CURIOUS

GREEN WARRIORS OF INDIA

Stories of legendary environmentalists, bird-loving kids, and the magical world of orchids.



India's Environmental Heroes



Richard Mahapatra

Stories of Chipko, water warriors, indigenous movements, and scientists who shaped India's unique environmentalism.

"In India, environmentalism as I define it was made possible only after the subcontinent came under the control of British imperialists. Colonialism constituted an ecological watershed, in that it brought with it new technologies of controlling, manipulating, reshaping and destroying nature. In pre-British times, the state had occasionally participated in natural resource management...under the British the state became a far more active player in human-nature interactions."
– **Ramachandra Guha**, in "Speaking with Nature"

Environment.
Environmentalism.
Environmentalist. For India these words have a different meaning. For, India is an ecological being – from the economy to people's sustenance to her political life, environment or the ecology is the most defining,

Being an Indian is the same as belonging to the environment, feeling environmentalism, and fighting like an environmentalist.

and dependence factor. Agriculture still sustains close to 50 per cent of India's population; forests are a source of livelihood for close to 20 per cent of the population; and livestock dependent on natural grazing earns the most for a rural Indian. Our modern economy critically depends on natural resources like minerals. So, being an Indian is the same as belonging to the environment, feeling environmentalism, and fighting like an environmentalist to protect our very existence.

In such a scenario, one would be tempted to

explore the nation's many environmental fights, and the environmentalists who steer those. As Ramachandra Guha, the historian, who has been quoted earlier said, our natural resources also attracted colonisation. And most of our environmental movements and environmentalists, by default, have fought against this very exploitation, and in essence, their movements have been to reclaim the critical link between us and our environment.

Why are we remembering this now? In January 2026, Madhav Dhananjaya Gadgil died. He was an ecologist who waged many battles for environmental protection. His death brings to notice our country's environmentalists who impacted our environmental movements. And more importantly, to understand through their movements, the spirit of 'Indian environmentalism.'

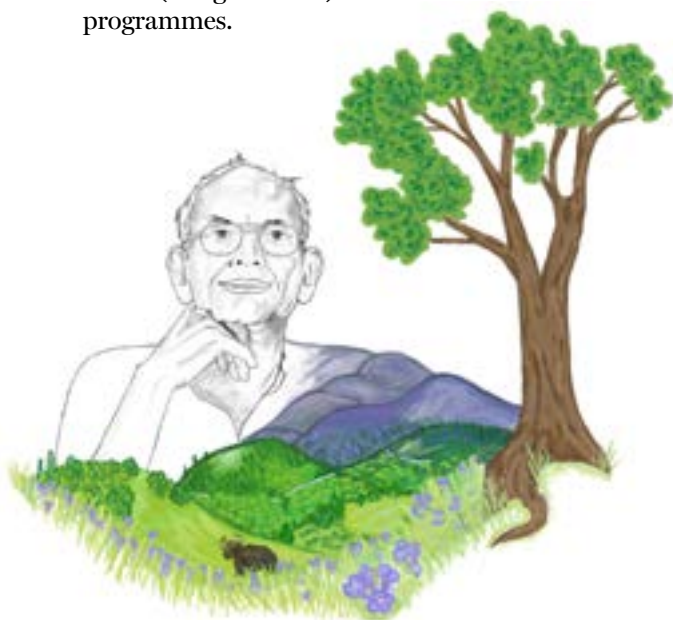
Madhav Gadgil

A scientist who made sociology and ecology as his axis.

Madhav Gadgil is widely known for the protection of the Western Ghats. His rigorous evaluation and research in the 1980s led to the Nilgiris being identified as the country's first biosphere reserve. In 2011, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel of which he was the chairman, recommended the declaration and protection of around 64 per cent of the Western Ghats region as an Ecologically Sensitive Area.

Gadgil's environmentalism was deeply rooted in the local social and ecological realities. In other words, he considered environmental protection not as a purely individual endeavour but involving the local communities to achieve sustainable results. He applied this principle of conservation while shaping the Biological Diversity Act of 2002. He was instrumental in creating the People's Biodiversity Register under this Act. These registers record the biological wealth and traditional knowledge of this region that the local communities have. And this gives them the legal rights over the use and benefit-sharing of their resources.

He always believed that nature conservation can't be achieved through laws only. Rather, he used to say that given the reality of India, the communities must be involved and made part of it. That's why he championed the role of Gram Sabha (village council) in various conservation programmes.



Rajendra Singh

Reviving traditional water-harvesting wisdom to tide over acute water scarcity.

Rajendra Singh, the founder of the non-profit [Tarun Bharat Sangh](#) based in Bhikampura in Alwar, Rajasthan, once famously said that India's desert has more water than any other city in India. He said this in the context of India's rich wisdom to harvest rainwater, and how it sustains the Thar, the world's most densely populated desert.

He has been working with various villages to revive their traditional water harvesting structures and transform them from water-deficient to water-surplus regions. When he started in Alwar in 1985, he just had one village to work with—to revive its traditional water harvesting system called *Johad*. After 40 years, he has revived nearly 9,000 *Johads* in over 1,000 villages across Rajasthan.

He pursues the principle of involving the local community who have been living in these places for generations and developed their own ways of harvesting rainwater. Reviving the traditional systems has regenerated five rivers, which have led to a boom in farming.

"India's communities are great environmentalists. Because they survive on the environment," he believes.

Cover Story



Chipko, the woman power and environmental awakening

The link between environment and economy have shaped India's most iconic environmental movements.

The Chipko Movement of the 1970s is the most widely recognised environmental movement in India. The people who steered it are thus the key environmentalists India should remember. Who are they? The many women of the Himalayan villages of Reni and Mandal in Uttarakhand.

Chipko means to hug, and these women literally did that when commercial loggers came to take away their forests. When the contractor and labourers arrived to cut the forest of Reni village in the morning of March 1973, there was no man present in the village. Under the leadership of the Mahila Mangal Dal President, **Gaura Devi**, the women from Reni dashed towards the forests to their rescue.

They hugged the trees and didn't let them be chopped. This act was not triggered due to what we would normally consider: a women's movement. They asserted the local community's rights over local resources because the forests sustained their daily life. It is the poor villagers who suffer the most when the fragile ecology degrades. And the Chipko movement pointed precisely that.

Chandi Prasad Bhatt, who led the Chipko and is regarded as a pioneering environmentalist, said, "The Chipko movement was not only about saving trees. It was also a movement for the rights of the local people on the forest wealth. We were explaining to the government that green trees should not be cut at all. Even if dry trees had to be cut, we, the local people, should use them. This was the root of this movement. If the local people have rights over the forest wealth, migration from the mountains can be stopped."



Saving the Niyamgiri, the indigenous communities

For the indigenous communities, belief is ecological

In 2013, the **Dongoria Kondhs** of Odisha's Rayagada district won a historic battle in the Supreme Court of India. They had been protesting against bauxite mining in their habitats, a rich ecosystem critical to their livelihood. In April 2013, the apex court ordered the government to seek fresh consent for mining from the Gram Sabhas (village councils). The court based its judgement on a constitutional provision. It said, "Religious freedom guaranteed to Scheduled Tribes and Forest Dwellers under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution is intended to be a guide to a community of life and social demands. The above mentioned Articles guarantee them the right to practice and propagate not only matters of faith or belief, but all those rituals and observations which are regarded as integral part of their religion. Their right to worship the deity Niyam-Raja has, therefore, to be protected and preserved."

The apex court upheld two major constitutional rights here: the right of the tribes to lead their own way of life and the right of the village councils to decide on matters that impact their lives.

Soon, the government had to ask permission for mining from twelve Gram Sabhas who ultimately rejected it. The indigenous people present in these sabhas opposed mining arguing that, "the Niyam Raja or 'King of Law' that resides at the hilltop... is interconnected with their identity, culture and interests."

This movement is therefore celebrated as the country's first environmental referendum. And, collectively defines what environmentalism in India is and who the environmentalists protecting it are.

The author is the Managing Editor of the Down to Earth magazine.





Priyanshi Rajput

Help Everyone!

A young girl recalls a story of bird feeders and kindness in summer heat.

It was afternoon and it was very hot outside.

Priya was coming home after playing.

She was drinking water again and again.

So, Priya's mother got upset with her. She wanted her to wait for her body to cool down first.

But Priya left for the terrace.

She saw her bird friend, RIYA, who was lying fainted due to heat.

Priya saw that there was a bowl on the roof.

So, she poured some water in it, and tried to feed the bird.

As soon as the bird drank water, she became happy.

She flew away.

Priya was also very happy. She liked doing this very much.

She learnt that we should always keep some water in bird feeders on our roofs.

We must help animals in every way and so we must "HELP EVERYONE".

Student of Class V, Municipal Corporation of Delhi Primary School, Joshi Road, Karol Bagh, New Delhi.

Drawing by the author Priyanshi Rajput



The Fascinating World of Orchids

Visually appealing, orchids also play an important ecological role by supporting biodiversity and specialised pollinators



Manjari V Mahajan

Orchids are one of the largest and most beautiful plant families in the world and are often affectionately referred to as the 'royal family' of plants. According to the *Orchid Specialist Group*, there are around 28,000 naturally occurring orchid species globally. Orchids are admired for their unique shapes, long-lasting flowers, and exotic colours, and are found across almost all parts of the world, from tropical rainforests to temperate regions and even high-altitude landscapes such as the Himalayas.

Most orchids are epiphytes, growing on trees without harming them, while others are terrestrial growing in soil or dependent on fungi for nutrients. Each species has its own personality—some with petals shaped like dancing figures, others resembling birds or butterflies, and some mimicking insects to attract pollinators, earning orchids the reputation of being the beautiful cheaters of the plant world.

Several countries have adopted orchids as their national

flowers, reflecting their cultural and symbolic importance. These include Singapore (Vanda Miss Joaquim), Honduras (*Rhyncholaelia digbyana*), and Colombia (*Cattleya trianae*), among others. In India too, states like Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have the **Foxtail Orchid** (*Rhynchostylis retusa*) as their state flower, while Sikkim recognises **Dendrobium nobile**, and Meghalaya has adopted orchid species such as **Paphiopedilum insigne** and **Renanthera imschootiana** as state flowers.

Orchids have also featured on postage stamps issued by several countries including Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, India, and others.

Orchids have a long history of use in traditional systems of medicine. In India, orchids have been used medicinally since the Vedic period. *Ashtawarga*, a formulation in Ayurveda, includes eight herbs, four of which are derived from different orchid species. Certain species of *Dactylorhiza* are used to prepare salep, a medicinal and nutritional product, while *Vanilla planifolia*, a climbing orchid, is one of the primary sources of natural vanilla flavouring.

Orchids require gentle care,

including bright indirect light, limited watering, a well-aerated growing medium, and good ventilation to keep their roots healthy. When cared for properly, orchids reward growers with elegant blooms that can last for weeks and sometimes even months.

Today, orchids are among the most threatened plant groups due to illegal collection, habitat destruction, deforestation, and climate change. In India they are protected under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, while many species are listed under CITES to regulate international trade. Conservation efforts such as habitat protection, orchid sanctuaries, tissue culture propagation, and public awareness are essential, as protecting orchids is not only about saving a beautiful flower but preserving ecological balance and a vital part of our natural heritage.

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Real Writers

i'm meltin' it

This melting reality isn't about hot fries — it's about a hotter planet. Recently, the US government rolled back an important rule that curbed greenhouse gas pollution. This rule helped control emissions from cars and industries. Without it, more heat-trapping gases could be released, making Earth warm even faster. Just like this melting "M," our clean air and comfortable climate can also slip away if big industries pollute unchecked.

The message: When protections for the planet disappear, everyone's future is at risk.

